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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 001076

SIPDIS

PASS TO NRC

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TAGS: [KNNP](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TRGY](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: GOI SAYS RECOVERED URANIUM IS DEPLETED, NOT HIGHLY ENRICHED

Classified By: PolCouns Geoff Pyatt for Reasons 1.5 (B,D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On February 5, the "Times of India" ran a hysterical story that metal plates recovered from two "small-time drug peddlers" on December 8, 2004 were analyzed and found to be weapons-grade highly enriched uranium. Subsequent reporting, including a press release from India's Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB), claimed the material was only depleted uranium (DU) with no significant radiation hazard. The head of AERB's Operating Plants Safety Division (OPSD) assured SciOff that the material was DU, and described identifying markings on the plates. Action request for DOE; paragraph 5. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The "Times" article entitled "2 held with weapons-grade uranium in Bareilly" reported that metal plates recovered from two small time drug peddlers were sent to the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) for examination, and were determined to be 253.6 grams of HEU containing 99 percent (weapons-grade) uranium-235. The article further reported that senior police sources did not rule out the possibility that the uranium had come from an atomic facility at Narora in Bulandshahr district (Uttar Pradesh), and that the arrested persons were carrying a list of other substances with specific industrial uses including 92U, 26Fe, 14Si, 28Ni, and 29Cu.

¶3. (SBU) In a February 5 conversation, R. Venkataraman, head of OPSD at India's AERB, asserted to SciOff that:

- The material was not/not enriched uranium, but was DU meant to shield radiological sources;
- It was not/not from the Indian atomic power station in Narora;
- BARC believes it was imported; likely from a scrap yard; and
- GOI would issue a detailed press release.

¶4. (U) On February 5, AERB released the following statement, which corroborates Mr. Venkataraman's comments:

Begin text:

Uranium Piece Does Not Pose Any Security Threat Or Health Hazard

This is with reference to the news item titled "2 held with bomb-ready uranium" that has appeared in a section of the press on February 5, 2005. In this connection, AERB would like to clarify the situation.

Taking note of the media report about the recovery of a uranium bar that appeared in a Varanasi newspaper in mid-December, AERB contacted the Senior Superintendent of Police, Bareilly for details of the case. He was also requested to send the piece to Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) for testing. The report of the analysis carried out by BARC has confirmed that the piece is of depleted uranium. This material contains very low concentration of fissile uranium (about 0.21% of Uranium-235) and cannot be used for producing a bomb. As such the piece does not pose any security threat.

The piece also does not pose any significant radiation/health hazard as the radiation dose on the piece is negligible.

Such pieces of depleted uranium, being a heavy material, are generally used as shielding material in imported industrial radiography cameras, radiotherapy units used in hospitals or as counterweight in aircraft. There have been instances in the past when such pieces have been found in scrap yards.

The piece is now in the custody of AERB.

End text.

¶5. (C) In a February 9 conversation with Mr. Venkataraman, SciOff obtained a verbal description of the recovered material as follows:

- Two metal pieces of aircraft balance weight with "holes for an allen wrench";
- Both had "NH Inc." and "Unauthorized Adjustment Prohibited" inscribed on them.

AERB officials speculate that the material entered India as scrap, and would like to learn who the manufacturer was. Mission would be grateful for any DOE advice in this regard.

Comment

¶6. (C) Subsequent press reporting has mostly mirrored the AERB release, although the author of the original "Times" article asserted in a follow-up piece that Bareilly police are still concerned that "the seized metal piece is radiating." At this stage we are confident this is a case where a journalist's lack of scientific understanding led to premature and inaccurate reporting.

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